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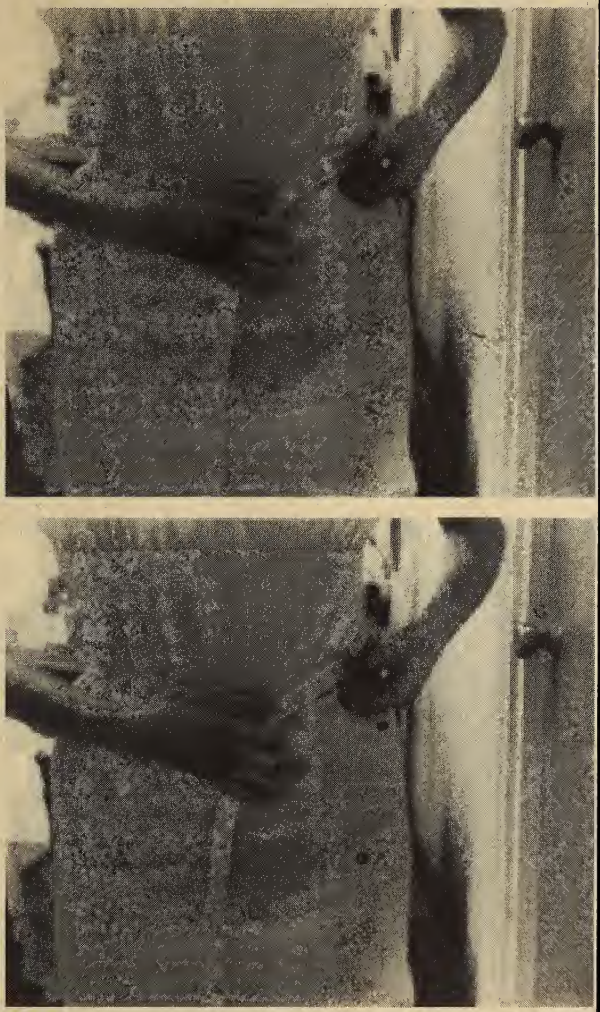
Mount Voices

A Journal of Poetry and Prose



A Publication of
Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles

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A Journal of Poetry and Prose

A Publication of Mount St. Mary's College
12001 Chalon Road, Los Angeles,
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Dedicated to
David Missey
June 11, 1952 -
November 21, 2000

Mount Voices

A publication of
Mount St. Mary's College

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Foreward

With its mid-nineties inception, Mount Voices set out to provide an outlet for the newly realized literati of Mount St. Mary's College. As the school and its students evolved, so did the magazine, and in 1998 the decision was made to extend the call for authors beyond the school's population, bringing in submissions from around the country. Among these was "Weather Update," a poem by Karri Lynn Harrison. This work, first published in Mount Voices, received the Pushcart Prize in 2000, and Mount St. Mary's name was vaulted to book jacket covers alongside the Yale, Harvard and Paris Reviews.

1998 also saw the beginning of the Writer's Series at Mount St. Mary's, which sought to bring the American literary canon to our campus. Award-winning authors, including Francisco Goldman, Mark Doty and Marilyn Chin, have since spoken in the student art gallery, surrounded by a hundred or so students and faculty resting on folded chairs with cookies and crackers. These same authors visit creative writing classes or hold question and answer sessions, sharing themselves and their works with students, taking and answering questions, assuaging or confirming the uncertainties and hopes of egg-toothed authors. Most recently, Cristina Garcia not only read from her *Dreaming In Cuban*, nominated for a National Book Award, but also sat for an interview with the editor of Mount Voices.

In the process of making this journal, the staff, our advisor and I have met at Canter's Deli of Fairfax, and the neighboring J. Paul Getty Museum to stuff our faces with words and food, all in the pursuit of literature and a free lunch. Over pastrami-on-sourdough (we'll pass on the rye) and sushi we wrestled with every work and debated its merits – our anxiety soothed only by the soft cushion of fresh tuna – before choosing a few grease and soy marked manuscripts. These pieces are not simply of Mount St. Mary's, or Los Angeles or even the west coast – they are American, and not cohesive in theme or style. They are connected only by their quality and insight into our lives at the rise of the twenty-first century.

Seen through the snow of the past is a "sump, located beyond the outfield fence...our own Mason-Dixon line," the water an indifferent accessory to the mediocre tragedy of drowned house cats and neighborly bigotry in a middle-American town where Joey Nicoletti once lived. This town is not the asphalt sprawl of Christine Byks' hood, and the "small tits, skinny face" of her girl on the bus, threatened by "sleek wolves...with hard bodies to devour their prey" – her journey's end is left unexplained. And the "dozen reasons to give up haggling over the price of weavings" is not know yet in either locale, though Roseann Lloyd likely finds them agonizingly obvious.

The bitter and solemn tastes of these are not the only tones to cross one's tongue in reading this collection of writings, culled as they are from not only the curdled shortcomings but also the surprise burst-against-your-palate joys of

living, like Anne Buster's "green, green kisses" or the delicacy of infant bats' "sweet fur, skin thin as rice paper, beating" Stefi Weisburd finds where others fear. Each piece is wrenching in its intensity, whatever the flavor or contents, and each, if only for a moment, transcends its visceral roots, leaving us with the intangible graces of rhythm and image.

Amanda Prince
Editor

Poetry

Desert Place

Desert places in the child's mind, no room
for angels. Something very bad has happened.
All he can think of, heat without water.
He wants water in heaven but finds heat
and the prick of hard sand to soft skin.
He wished the dog back to life because
the desert is no swim in the river,
chasing sticks, no cool toilet bowl for drinks,
no boy in the swimming pool and dog lounging
in the shade of picnic table.
He wants water. The throat is deathbed dry.
You bet that boy wants to live.

The Dream Hole

You have trouble recognizing
unfamiliar surroundings.
Heat obscures the distance.
The sun split by power lines.

Someone calls your name.
Sounds fall flat,
Slither curves in the dusk.
The sun slips under.

You look for reason.
A doorway marked infinity is out of reach.
A vision of the white tail lightning leap
on the surface of the eye.

A solid wall of rain
reaches out to meet you.

La Joie de Vivre

One mantis takes another.
Both too green,
alive in each other.
Green for Green again.

The devil salamander,
envious Satan green again,
eyes with pornographic pleasure
his evening meal.

Amazon

Blanketed in the naked cold,
she is stripped of weapons.
Breaths deep; goes quietly under.

Autonomy is a myth.
Her breast is left to die on a slab.
She will not succumb.

These things kill from the inside.

A Beautiful Girl

The men's eyes flock,
mouths open as summer dogs
their beers melting against their sweaty palms
like glove compartment candy bars.

She is consumed.
But as we continue our fumbling small talk
we don't lose the bobbing brunette head
as she parts the sheets of leather and gray flannel.

Her skirt shifts up
across the smooth of thigh
and at that, we don't even pretend not to look.
One man across from me has
memorized every freckle on her left calf, unknowingly.

We stare into the liquid below us and then up again --
shameless as a hunger for a hot meal.
Moving as one entity,
ashamed of our desire, our compulsion,
but unable to look away.

She smoothes and sits.
One walks lone towards oasis,
sidles up to the table only to be turned away.
And we are proud,
Living vicariously through his rejection --
that one precious scowl, meant just for him.

(unititled)

Oh for green, green kisses
from green, green girls
and the exorbitance of anxious affection.
Like a chocolate mint that has
smeared a rumpled, hotel pillow case,
one desires these affairs of the flesh.

The earthy sensuality of summer evenings,
excessive attention, vain, pleasing, doomed desire
is like a ripe peach in one's mouth.
That pulse that maketh us all mad,
beating through our blood -- needful and demanding as
a dog for dinner.

Bestial, vulgar yearnings
that in our embarrassment we deny,
have such biological beauty --
pertinent and reasonable as church bulletins.

Riding in the Hood

Me: Kook-Aid red hair, poor girl growing up
in urban hell. Gran has fever, this hot
country burning her dark skin at County
Hospital. She might die; I visit. On
Bus 13 sleek wolves harass me, taunting,
"Bitch, we gonna train you, eat you up." I
stare at trash-filled gutters as the bus jerks
left onto Hunter Street. They don't care I'm
a daughter, sister–once they get me I'll
be a mother. Wolves with hard bodies to
devour their prey. They size up my small tits,
skinny face, see I'm weak. At Forrest Road
I get off; they follow. I ignore but
only fresh meat will satisfy their hunger.

stark
raving
buddha

buddha ran
stark naked
through my house
dangling my
potential
in front of
my face that
dropped like blind
bats from the
rafters one
arm around
my sloop sloped
shoulders one
behind his
basking back
in shadows
he opened
his chest where
i cried like
black crows
wandering
through wakeful
dreams and he
pointed to
things i had
never seen.

Twelve Hours

The shadow at the corner of her eye is
the place where she would like to know
that Faulkner wrote longhand
twelve hours at a stretch,
the last corner her knuckles rub as
she rises with the first squeak of sun,
eight thousand feet above nowhere.

The smudge before emerging dawn is
the hammock she uses to blur the
longhand day ahead,
the last slow deep breath before she
dons yesterday's clothes:
black lace, silver threaded spangles
black rubber shoes on large feet.

Hollow halls between mud homes and
the backsides of rounded hills are her
sudden hiding spots in twelve hours of
pulling scrub from jagged hillsides, grinding
wheat to fine flour, sitting on cold floors,
boiling thick mint tea on naked thirsty flames, not
speaking of fiery pain in her back.

The sinking end of day is her
bowl of newfound knowing
her wide-open eyeful when
water seems sleek,
wheat seems like gold,
mint tea seems like sips of
the king's forbidden wine.

formation

down bulging netherworlds an
alien congress of gentle
steely organs plays its shi-
vering symphony respond-

ing to the evolution
of soft choirs, taut bodies,
tumbling loves, then just
gut brainstem decisions

millions of
biological
miles away
unfolding

life in harmonies
of pinks, grays, matter
always unseen yet
familiar – music

playing audibly in
the next room – a slowly
cupped palm catches pulses
life and stranger matter

breathing their own
yoga of syn-
chronicity.

She fears the summit's
cymbal crash against
her flesh: life let loose,
the dizzying fall,

last gulp into chaos.

There is a noise that automobile tires make on wet asphalt
as if oceans were to suck their own spray through foam.

After each morning
there is not rain,
but stillness in an awakening.
A sort of drying off period
for our dreams. As if
standing nude in the shower
makes us shake the beauty
out from our eyes.
We stand separated and still
wet, reaching for
an old towel, warmed by the
accumulation of years alone.
It is that moment, that
frozen gesture, when each of us
wishes we didn't have to dry.

Each morning after
rain, there is not silence
but an awakening.
A sort of drying off
period. As if
Mother Nature were standing nude,
in an old cast iron tub,
shaking all of the beauty bestowed
upon all of us.
She stands still wet, reaching
for an old towel warmed by sunlight.
It is that moment, that frozen gesture,
when each of us wishes
She would never dry.

The Old Walnut

I stood naked
in my front room

looking out a window.
Passersby with wrinkled brow
and reddened faces, dropped their heads
down and to the right.
I stood there in a cold puddle
that had formed around my feet from my recent shower.

"They cut down the old walnut," I said.
The lack of reply added to my feeling of discomfort.
"They cut down
the old walnut," I said again.
This time in a louder voice, and
silence only followed. I turned
to see why I was getting no response.
The room was empty, so I shouted
"They cut down the old
walnut," raising my pitch and trailing off at the end.
Only to be mocked by more silence. I turned again
to face the awkward stump, I caught my reflection
nude in the glass, & realized that sometime
between the present &
in the middle of the night,
when the city had come and removed my
walnut tree, I had become a lonely old man,
standing wet,
with no clothes,
muttering only to be heard by himself.

Good Morning Sunshine

The facing day
blankets a rose
orange hued warmth over the damp hallowed earth.
The pulse begins,
lines of callused hands clutch steering wheels,
styrofoam coffee
cups, they merge
then weave through orange
barrels, around flashing lights.
Tattooing a cadence across
tanned and stretched asphalt skins.
Helicopters circle backups
& accidents that cease

the coagulated flow,
mimicked by the slow
circular drivel
of radio voices
& heads that nod in
a dashboard ornament
hypnotic agree, that none
of this is worth it.
They would all get off
if they could only find
their right exit.

I Never Had the Chance to Work at A & W

I ached to hold a teenage job
at the A & W toward the north
end of town. Despite the requisite
shit-brown shorts and ketchup smears
on the orange striped smock,
I wanted more than anything to
wear the weighty cylinders
holding coins in perfect thumb-
released order tight

against my crotch *Hips swayed*
money bumped Click-ching
dropped change into cupped palms
offered without guile.
So innocently they strolled the gauntlet
of hungry bodies and ravenous eyes,
you'd almost believe they weren't aware
that the very essence of all the world's wars
was slung casually round

their hips *Pussy, Money*
Mama Burger, Papa Burger, Frosty Mug
all carefully perched on rubber legs
straddling the window of the driver's side.

I wonder now, why never the passenger's?

I wonder now, if Dad got wood
when the tanned arm and half
a breast squeezed through his window
to offer coined ejaculate dripping
from slots aligned with teenaged twats.
I wonder now,

if it wouldn't have been
a disappointment to peddle

Joyce Liu

A Snuffing of Ego

The cars honk as I choke on popcorn.
(Caramel flavor is worth it)

Beauty salons close
as womyn fight to enhance
more than just their hair.

A paintbrush dries
and baby bok choy wilts,
poised and waiting for her portrait.

Patterns never make sense,
shadows -- these rip-offs forever moving.

That gold-leafed classic
in an effortless stance of secrets and honor,
chooses another reader.

We regret to inform you _____.

An Insomniac's Prayer

Dear God:
Give me something you know I can't afford.

30 Blue whales,
a coral reef,
2 dozen opal shells.

Piranesi's etchings,
a Li Po original,
Dickinson's peppermint basket.

The Aurora Borealis,
a million wishes,
the sun at midnight.

But instead
you give me
faux pearls on a string
a Hallmark card
and a glow-in-the-dark star
that no longer glows.

If fate is sour,
can I still pray for sugarcane?

Pen pal

Caught in some weird dimension I dream
we swim through tragedies. The oceans
play with us, sea anemones our fireflies
in this dark and quiet flutist's cloister.
Like baby whales, we chase each other
around plankton hidden from the oxygen world.
"This cellar door leads to seaweed," you murmur.
Our fingers soggy like trailmix left in the rain
I see the wart on the shark skin -
that underwater pitbull peaceful in his walk.
You the fibula and I the tibia
in this dreamstate where only you are the wax of my shine.

A Dozen Reasons to Give Up Haggling Over the Price of Weavings

1. for the weaver herself who takes the bus to market at 4 a.m.
1.5 for the buck and a half she brings home each day
2. for the discount rate para dos she offers too readily
3. for the 3 languages she speaks, working on the 4th
4. for her babies born after the war
    one for the cousin killed in the highlands
    one for uncle in Minnesota
    two for the brother and sister hiding in Mexico
5. for the age she started to weave
6. for her favorite colors: canario, rojo, verde, morado, indigo y café
7. for the quetzal/dollar exchange
8. for the animals that dance in her cloth: cat, quetzal, monarchs, deer, baby chickens, dog, squirrel eating chamomile, dove
9. for the tortillas in her apron pocket
10. for ten fingers she says she's lucky to have
11. for the family she has to feed
12. for the men, the dozens of unmarked graves

(unititled)

Some sort of rising,
an escalation;
a sinking, a descent too --
Whatever it is,
it begins every night
at eleven post meridian.
Every night
the slow drag, the speeding
unrest, acceleration
towards each ingestion of oxygen,
each hiccup of delay between each
minute puts the weighty willful push
against my faith that the time,
this moment, will come and it comes
and when it does it always
almost
doesn't.
Because eleven o'clock
and ten minutes is the longest
goddamn minute I have ever
sucked breath through.
Through all seventy-two beats
and countless other admonishments --
that this is an ill-placed expectation,
a false theology, bondage to the clock
for those ten minutes and fifty-nine seconds is
wrong, only I still wait for it,
imagining that, even if I'm not watching
those infernal seconds pound by, I'll
still feel the chains fall free of me,
still know when I'm flying through
the slow time of unleashed hope,
so I will fall back to my bruised knees

and prepare to strangle myself with my
unceasing wish for the world
I want to be mine.

(untitled)

I am seeking
the speed, the travel.
I want the race car, the roadster,
the souped up, the chrome, the dice.
I'm looking for the an-ti-ci-pation
of the drive, of meeting the dark.
I want the hunched over, unnecessary
lean forward, like it will make me speed faster;
one arm curled white-knuckled around the wheel,
one arm out the window with a life its own
grasping for the wind, like I could pull myself faster.
I want this to last on my mundane way,
even stopping, as we must, I want it to last
during those breaths in between my
imaginary bursts of acceleration.
But having no distance to travel at present,
I am seeking the speed,
the thrum of blood in veins,
in the knowledge of its existence,
in acknowledgement of the travel
we have happily had.

An Introduction

Everyone agreed that Bill McBride,
who introduced his hand
through an unzipped fly

as John Hancock, was unique;
likewise, his Uncle Charley,
who was so lonely he that he used

a vacuum cleaner for stimulation,
dubbed it "Creative Spirit:"
And so might his friend Hector have been,

answering my inquiry about his favorite color
with "Maple Syrup. It sticks with you,"
hoping that at least Charley,

if not Bill himself,
would smirk at him with approval,

would like him for the comedian he wanted to be,
rather than the Havana native he was,
always greeting him with
"A Green Card for your thoughts."

When Bill was arrested
for pissing on a police car,
he grinned like the top head

of a totem pole;
the muscles of his arms
strained in the rigid grip

of the police officer.
Hector shoved an entire pack
of Big League Chew in his own mouth

to avoid saying anything

that would piss off the cop
more than he already was.

Charley removed a pen
from his coat pocket, took off the coat
and handed it to the officer,

hoping that Bill's body
would fill it out in the country jail.

Then Bill waved good-bye to them
with handcuffed wrists
and was shoved into the car,
unable to make another introduction.

Memorial Sump

I'm driving through a town where I once lived.
The snow is falling. The snow is my window.

I remember sites of anguish: a sump
located beyond the outfield fence

of Memorial High School's baseball field,
and Smith Lane, our own Mason–

Dixon Line, where the swimming pools
were in the ground, and John Deere mowers

rode across the front lawns.
I remember holding a toothpick in my mouth,

staring at the sump water:
Mrs. Bridges' cat drowning to death

in a stapled Waldbaum's paper bag. I see us
falling on our asses while learning how to ice skate.

Corey King's bicycle went the way of the
Andrea Doria there because he was a Jew.

Our neighborhood was built
for viewing pleasure, like a picture frame

that covers holes punched into living room walls'
beautiful frames of polished oak,

holding the portraits of families
with pained expressions in their eyes.

Loose-leaf

Field trip or not, we walked on the school bus one at a time,
trapped in the morass of calm, cool and collected:

after Louie, the bus driver, lowered the shrill voices
of the cymbals blaring from the radio,
he examined our bus passes,
frantically scribbling the Spanish versions

of our names on his clipboard,
Pilar, Felipe, Ramon and Jose, pointing each child
toward the nearest unoccupied seat
as if his finger

was a hairy compass needle;
his blood-shot glare fixed on the street ahead
and the armada of cars passing us by.
Stuttering's instant replay tortured Glenn Meyer.

And Dawn Brooks, after earning two dollars
for giving Steven Manchester, our neighborhood Adonis,
a blowjob in the back of the school bus,
was certain that she could make it big

in pictures. And Mr. Duffy, my neighbor-turned-
history teacher, blind in one eye, snarled language
raw as rain whenever a student failed
to fold a roadmap correctly.

Classmates, aspiring Rhodes Scholars, drug lords –
Nikki Scharf, Phillip Krumpter, Ray Shraegen and myself,
we played a game:
each of us took out a piece of loose-leaf paper,

wrote down legions of names
of people we despised,
people we knew from television, movies,
or gym class;

people who deserved to ride the Hell Express,
where Dawn always rode shotgun
and Steven worked the door
-spits from laughter glisten on the emergency window,

high wavering howls
helping us withstands the wild spitballs
and milk duds flying
across the green skies of the bus.

Teachers were "pissed-off lemons,"
was how Ray put it;
especially Mr. Duffy,
whose face was described as

"A station wagon without a headlight,
waiting to be put out of its fucking misery."
Nothing we said or wrote
could help Glenn, bloodied,

sitting by the emergency window
after Steven punched him in the mouth
for picking up the pencil
that had fallen out of Dawn's purse.

At Home, In Their Bedroom

Faith, a misplaced toy, hides coy beneath the bed
covers with shoes he bought in Cancun,
without her. All liars, lenders of promise,
Who never take her where she has not been.

The door is open, empty hangers say too much.
He calls it out-of-town, away-on-business,
The closet whispers, "lonely."

On the bed, wife knows
the promise of return gives way
to brevity of trust.
She sits, but she should run.

Last time he told her of water,
A beach where rocks are worn by waves
Until they are not stone anymore, but sand.

Modern Epic

She ascends from the subway with every war unwon.
Living lent easy resignation.
She smokes cigarettes to blow time away.

Amaranth, world, she thought you'd never fade,
But born of rape,
The city lets Helen grow old.

Not dead yet, but dying,
She shows how opposites function:
The goddess walks on the ground.

Treat her as the Helen who never left for Troy.
Love may not forgive, but moves on,
The creation much greater than creator.

Beauty is nothing until it is spent.
Here the hero should speak but cannot,
Let her epic explain:

Life could be different, and will not be.

Mystery of Water

If time's closest relation is water,
Accidents do not happen, they are purposed,
Then he was a smart man.

If instinct says to stay away from staying,
Children run from the comfort they know,
Then he did not chase her into water, he followed.

If the lake is not calm but settling,
To know is based on believing.
Then this is the mystery of water.

The Actress Forgets

Noise comes in from the corner, whites
out space, time, my line. What do I say today?
Beneath the yawns of time, lapse of mind, the
light constant remains. I do recall:
Art fights the war of human decline,
my script knows my line, the world turns steady
to bore. Light expresses time,
time how long I have failed. Half of art is
hearing, I need to hear what came before.
There is too much longing in
necessity. Unable to conceal emotion with function,
I tire from need to remember,
never to mean what I say.
No spot light will provide my memory with voice.
Someone beckons from a corner,
I would follow but
I've forgotten.

It Widens

My lightning is a fuse that ripples smooth
lives above the rain to fall much faster
Searches a flood
feels thunder is no island to cling to.

Stand in the middle of a river
it widens
Watch as water rises
waxes distance before you.

My lightning, I
light trees on fire in search of you.

Amanda Prince

Vietnam

Oh, I must, he thinks, her profile
sharpening with every step.
He intends to bring bridges and
charm her in turn, though his body is knotted
and his days fall rotten from the branch.
He would enchant, so he parts his lips,
but the liquor again loads his tongue
with the dead weight of unauthorized remorse:
"I killed a lot in Vietnam."

She had demanded of him
communion,
her reception of him,
some sweetness asked confession –
he could only comply.
"I'm sorry," and he believes
this grace she has granted
as he leaves her side for
his distilled forgiveness,
chilling above a corner stool.

Recuerda

Recuerda cuando te acabas de levantar
Tu piel tibia, tierna siente
El aire sobre de ella
Y notas como tu pecho se eleva y sumerge como delfín en mar.

Tu cabello,
Como yegua rebelde por un momento olvida que es
Y bebe el agua que sólo en sueños se da;
El agua de tus manos que acaban de despertar.

Es un día diferente,
Los pétalos toman el tamaño de soles
Los minutes se desaparecen, arrastrados por la falta de memoria.
Y por fin escuchas tus latidos,
Constantes, decididos:
Son gotas de lluvia mil veces magnificadas que vienen de lo divino
Para unirse a tus mares, y rios
Que sedientos están.

Hoy es día de calor,
Es día, es noche a la vez.

El cantar de los pájaros se convierte en melodía de grillos,
La brisa del sereno es Rocio al amanecer.

Soy.
Soy Rocio al amanecer.

Lorena Santos

(untitled)

Oh, my dark, dark night
displayed against my windowpane.
I'll sit and wait for you
-- For just ten minutes more.
Then I swear that I will go.
Ten more minutes to see the wind
and trees conspire in obvious secrecy
to bring about a storm.

How I admire that sort of power,
looking at it from my slow, anxious hour.
Bugs are silhouetted against
the artificial light.
Dancing towards its heat,
a ritual both private & innate.
I'm like those bugs, you know,
gravitating to what's deathly warm.
But . . . ten more minutes, then I'll go.

Prose

Anna Harrington

White Christ

The horses come back. Moving slowly, their bodies plod down the small plain above the ruins. Just close enough to the tumbled rocks that the dyed-blonde tourist on the lead horse leans half out of her saddle to snap a jiggling picture. She will take more when the horses reach the edge of the field, at the spot where the ground plunges away to the valley and grants unobstructed views of the city one thousand feet below. All the tourists do. They all want pictures of Cusco sprawling throught the valley and, on the edge of the cliff, the white statue of Christ the Redeemer reaching ninety feet into the air. They do not notice the snow-capped mountain opposite Christ's spreading arms, the one the natives call Apu -- mountain god. They prefer the statue in its circle of barbed wire, strung there to keep the vandals away.

The group stops in front of the cluster of wooden buildings where I wait for them, and I slip into my pocket the letter with the U.S. postmark that Gabriel brought me this morning from town. I take the reins to keep the tourists away from kicking hindquarters and bared teeth. But the horses are too tired from their afternoon ride across the hills to cause trouble and only shudder with freedom as the weight slips from their backs.

The tourists chatter -- they think the stable is quaint, so third world, complete with weathered siding and chickens pecking in the dust, the smell of horses, and laundry drying in the courtyard. They love the open-sided barn attached to the house in such a way that is impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins, and they ooh and aah over the peculiar view which mixes the timeless beauty of the Andes with the kitsch of the cristo blanco. One of them snaps a photo of our dirty Volkswagen van.

From the road, a campesina approaches on bare feet, wearing the brightly colored clothes and full skirts that the local women have worn for generations and now wear for the tourists. Two neuvo soles per posed photo. A blue and orange blanket on her back contains the cheap pottery pieces she sells to the tourists in the ruins -- Inca colors, she recites her mantra eight hours each day, es Inca, very pretty, you like . . . She smiles for the group of women and reveals a mouth filled with rotted teeth stained by tobacco and coca leaves, then pulls a cloth doll from her pack. A minature version of herself.

"Oh, look -- a doll!" One of the women reaches for it. "How cute -- we don't have one of these yet, do we?"

Her friend shakes her head. "No, but if you want it, remember to barter. Only offer half of what she asks for."

"Es muy bonita, si, senora?"

"How much?" The woman asks, loudly and slowly, as all the tourists

do, as if yelling will bridge language barriers.

The campesina knows enough English to barter. "Diez soles," she says. "Diez -- ten."

"Offer her five," the friend urges.

"Five." The blonde holds up her hand, palm forward, a gesture which could mean either that she is offering five soles or that she is pushing her away. "Cinco."

The campesina shakes her head. "No, no -- Ella tiene una cara bonita, y los ojos azules. See? See? Vestido --." Her dirty fingers touch the doll's skirts. "-- how do you say?"

"Five."

"Nine -- nueve."

"She's offering nine," the blonde woman whispers to her friend. "What do you think?"

"Offer her six. That's okay, I think."

She nods. "Six . . . si-es."

"Ocho."

"Seven and no more."

"Ocho."

"I said seven."

The campesina holds out her hand. "Si -- siete."

The woman gives her seven soles. The coins rattle as they disappear into the folds of her black skirts. "Gracias, senora." She pulls a pottery jar from her pack and holds it out -- a pitcher, a puma face on it side. "Es feo, no? You like?"

"No, I don't want anything --"

She pushes the pot toward the blonde. "You like --es Inca."

"No --"

"Si, si -- you like --"

"Basta!" I turn on her angrily. "Ve tu -- Ve tu a tu casa."

"Pero yo trabajo --"

"Ve tu antes you llame mi marido."

"El no es tu marido." She laughs. "Es tu mula!"

In a burst of rage, I whip the long leather reins at her. They hit her arm with a loud crack, biting into her flesh. I pull back to strike again, as hard as I can, but she steps away. Just out of reach of the reins and the prancing horse.

With a look at me that is more mocking than angry, she tucks the pitcher into her pack and heads slowly toward the road. She glances over her shoulder to see if I am still there, still guarding my own tourist prey, and I watch her until she disappears into the shallow ditch running beside the ruins. The ditch that leads to the old Inca steps descending down from the fortress to the city. The setting sun behind her silhouettes her plump figure against the sky for just an instant, then she drops below the edge of the hill, out of sight. I can still hear her laughter.

"Thank you," the blonde tells me. "Gracias -- mu-cho grac-ias."

I shrug and mumble, "De nada." They are looking at me closely, now that they have seen a campesina beside me for comparison. My hair and eyes are dark, my skin browned by the high altitude sun, but not dark enough to dispel suspicion. They stare, wondering why my clothes are different from the campesina's, why my face is more oval, my nose pointed . . .

I turn my face away from them. "Esa campesina es un monstruo quien venderia a su chiquilla por ciento soles," I comment rapidy, thickening the Peruvian accent which I have learned to mimic, hoping they will not notice that I am one of them. An American.

The blonde cocks her head. Perhaps she recognizes the difference in my eyes. "Do you speak English?"

I only stare silently at her.

She frowns, a little embarrassed. "Never mind. Here --." She presses a one-sol coin into my hand. A tip. Thirty cents American. "For you."

I bite my tongue against the sharp English words flooding my mind. None of them right. What do I say to them? That their sol tip is an insult, when they think I should consider it a windfall? That I choose to live in a drafty shack between the ruins of Sacsayhuaman and Christ? Or that I was once like them -- perhaps even better -- once working as an executive in a corner office in downtown Chicago with an assistant and a ten million dollar client base? They wouldn't understand my decision to be here any more than my family, even if they were capable of comprehending a dual existence between the business executive I used to be and the native I have chosen to become.

Instead, I reply quietly. "Gracias."

Gabriel walks out from the courtyard. He smiles at each of the women, asks them in fluent English if they enjoyed the ride, flirts innocently with them, offers to sell them a horse as a souvenir. Their relaxation in his presence is instant and expected, as it is with all the female tourists who come to the stable. He is more of what they are used to than the other men they have seen since landing in Lima -- taller, more slender than squat, with skin more olive than dark, an appearance more Spanish than Quechuan. Even the sharpness of his nose comforts them. And with the stubble on his face and ponytail at his neck, he could be mistaken for a hippie. If he weren't Peruvian.

He collects the money for the ride, sorts the bills neatly with the heads all facing the same way, and slips them into his trouser pocket. One of the few mannerisms he still possesses from his previous life in Lima. Or, I asume that it is, having met him after, when he had already forsaken his banking job and bought the stable on the hill above Cusco. I watch the tourists who in turn watch him -- even the way he handles the money is familiar to them, a westernized movement, a comfort in the middle of a strange continent. And because they are accepting of his appearance as bridging two cultures, they are more accepting of me and falsely believe that I was born here.

Gabriel says goodbye and wishes them well with a kiss on each of

their cheeks -- a common practice which they find exotic and romantic -- then he points them in the direction of the paved road where a taxi waits to return them to their hotel in the city. But they fuss about the road, playing the routine of the helpless tourist, so he agrees to walk with them and see them off in the taxi. I watch them leave, with Gabriel in the center of the group. As always. The sun has dipped behind the mountain tops, creating a flood of shadows on the valley floor, but golden light still falls across the tops of the hills and on Gabriel as he strides easily down the road. And the head and shoulders of the white Christ are illuminated.

The flirting is necessary, I know. The primary business of the stable comes by word-of-mouth, spread by happy tourists to other travellers, to hotel staff, even to taxi drivers who are then asked by other tourists about activities among the ruin sites. But I do not like it. Just as I do not like the way Gabriel allows the guides to have free run of the stables and the two rooms comprising our house, as if they live there with us, as if it is just another part of the stable. They do not listen to me when I tell them to stay outside, when I give them orders about the horses, or when I assign the tours to them. They always turn to Gabriel and treat me as if I have no more authority than the boy who mucks out the stalls. My mother says that Gabriel has the best of both worlds, so why should he change? -- the bachelor's quarters he desires, and the maid he sleeps with. Hismula -- his mule.

But I am free to leave whenever I choose, I remind myself. When I have grown too tired of cold nights with no hot water, of limited electricity which goes out more than it is on, of dust in the dry season and mud during the rains -- of giving my affection without clear reciprocation -- then I will walk down to the city, to the AeroPeru office on the Plaza de Armas, and purchase a one-way ticket to Miami.

When Gabriel returns, he shows me the same smile he gives to the tourists. "Not a bad group, eh? Good pay."

I hand him the sol.

He frowns. "What's this?"

"Good pay," I say and lead the horses away.

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I lean against the posts supporting the courtyard gate and stare out at the way the night has blackened the fields and valley. The thin air is cold. From the living quarters, I hear the horse guides talking around the tiny fire. One of them plays the pipes. A few notes of El Condor Pasa -- the one the tourists all love to hear because it is the only Andean song they know -- then they break into raucous laughter. They are drinking the chicha that Maria brought from the settlement just beyond the eucalyptus grove and ingesting coca leaves, telling tall tales, sharing the woes of their marriages, trading opinions on horses and soccer. The night muffles their voices; beyond the buildings is silence, stillness, a deep and dark void hovering over the edge of the

cliff.

But the night is not completely dark. The lantern in the courtyard behind me casts yellow shadows across the VW can, and its light spills out into the gravel road. The large moon shines coldly on the mountains, on the short rock walls edging the fields, and on the alabaster Christ that glows like a specter. A holy ghost.

The letter is still in my pocket. It is from my parents, written in my mother's elegant handwriting. Two pages to tell me that my father is dying. But letters from the States arrive slowly in Peru, and those four weeks to live have dwindled to one.

The last time we saw each other we fought. About Peru. About erecting a life with some dirty, foreign hippie who didn't even have a job, in a shack between a religious statue and a bunch of rocks. My life was too good to leave and my job too lucrative, they insisted, and Gabriel wasn't good enough for me. My father never came to visit us here, he never opened the photography book of the Andes I sent to entice him to come. But mother came and reported back that we were living in a barn.

The night air chills my face and arms, but still I do not go inside. I want to be alone, away from the guides' jokes about Americans with their open purses and closed minds.

This is why I stay, I remind myself again, trying to be convincing -- the glow of the moon over the mountains and ancient ruins, the sound of horses mulling around the feed troughs mixing with the haunting melody of the pipes, the freshness of the cold air. Somewhere in front of me in the darkness sits Apu Ausangate, unseen but still present, somewhere, much closer, just up the hill behind the stables, stands a one-room house made of mud and straw, where a family huddles together in one bed against the night.

"I knew I'd find you here." Gabriel approaches me from behind and drapes a blanket of alpaca wool across my shoulders. He touches my face. "You're cold." He slips his arms around me. "Come inside."

"I will, soon."

I cannot relax within his arms. He is warm, solid, and I inhale the familiar scent of him -- the mixture of man and horse -- but tonight, that is not enough. I nestle my head against him, against the spot where his chest and shoulder meet, hoping for the usual comfort it brings, but finding none. When we first met, even when he was still a stranger, I wanted to crawl into his arms. Even as he helped me onto a horse and set me off acros the mountainside with Carlos to lead me and another guide on foot bringing up the rear. He must have laughed at the scene we made, resembling a warped tableau from Don Quixote. And yet, he invited me back the next day and rode alone with me into the hills. We did the same the following day. On the fourth day, I came to the stables and never left.

"What are you doing out here?" His voice is deep and low.

"Nothing. Just looking at the ruins."

He nuzzles the side of my face, and his warm breath tickles my ear.

"Sexy woman," he teases, a play on words. On the trick the guides use to teach the tourists to pronounce the name of the ruins. Sacsayhuaman -- sexy woman.

Usually, I laugh at the old joke, but not tonight.

He notices my sadness and strokes his finger against my cheek. "It's that letter, isn't it? I knew it would upset you. Querida, forget them. Your life is here now --."

"My father is dying."

My words drift into the darkness, mixing with the faint pipes before vanishing. Their dissolution only reinforces the enormity of space between us.

He kisses my forehead. "Lo siento," he whispers into my hair.

"Mother wants me to come home and stay until he passes."

"When will you leave?"

"I'm not sure I'm going to."

"You have to."

He is right, I know, but it also seems too easy for him to tell me to leave. To go away from the mountains and from him.

"I'll come with you," he tells me.

I'll come with you . . . but it is an empty offer. We both know that he will never be accepted by my family, not even if he cuts his hair and dresses in one of his old suits. They will never see the mountains reflected in the depths of his eyes, realize how tranquil the horses and valley make him, or experience the quiet strength that radiates from the Sacred Valley. Nor will they ever see it in me. Instead, they will only notice the olive tones in his skin, my now wild hair, his heavy accent, the strangeness of my clothes. But perhaps that really is all there is to see.

"No." I force a smile for him and kiss his hand, "It's tourist season. You have to stay here."

He says nothing, not even to protest. In the darkness, I wonder if we share the same fear, or if it strikes me alone -- the fear that I might not return.

From behind us, the pipes play again, a Quechua melody as old as the city below. Someone joins in with a guitar. In the distance, the tourist train from Aguas Calientes winds its way down the mountainside toward the valley and announces its presence in the darkness with a low, mournful whistle.

"Come on." Gabriel takes my hand and pulls me toward the ruins.

The moon lights the field, allowing us to step easily over the hand-plowed furrows and stones. Our shadows intertwine on the ground. When we reach the massive rocks that form what is left of the fortress' walls, he scales them easily and disappears over the top.

But I am too small to follow.

I run further down the wall to the only set of steps cutting up steeply through the rocks. My feet do not falter even in the patches of darkness hidden from the moon. Testament to the countless times I have wandered these ruins, and to the intincts of steps and mountain slopes which have developed

inside me. Instincts that continue to grow each time I walk up the hill from the city, each time I stare at the ruins, each time I watch the children play in the fields. My feet have forgotten the feel of American concrete; business suits seem fantastical now, along with skyscrapers that suffocate and block out the sun. My freedom is the mountains, my religion lies in a stable between the Inca ruins and a giant white Christ.

Breathing deep in the thin air, I reach the top of the walls -- Gabriel isn't there. I look for him but see only the tumbled rocks on the field behind me and the artificial lights of the city below. For a moment, I panic, frightened of being alone. My heartbeat quickens, my breathing stops. A sickening feeling of sudden and intense desertion overwhelms me --.

And then I see him. At the edge of the wall, he faces out into the darkness toward Apu Ausangate. His hair loosened from its ponytail and spilling freely across his shoulders, his arms outstretched. A replica in flesh and blood of the white Christ glowing behind him.

As I approach, my footsteps silent on the rocks, he senses me. He turns toward me and smiles, his face beaming with an expression of deep love. I feel my chest expand with adoration and passion, reciprocated.

I reach for his hand, and I am home.

This is the hardest thing you've ever done. He's sitting and sobbing like a child with both of his arms wrapped around your waist and his tears are making a large wet spot on the stomach of your T-shirt. You let your hand rest lightly on the back of his neck. At a loss for words, you can only make those small maternal comfort sounds: shhhh, shhhh. But somewhere deep down you feel oddly cold, and this disturbs you. Your mind keeps flitting back to the other one, the one who always smiles for you.

"I am so sorry," he says in a voice you barely recognize. This is not his voice, this is not the way he sounds. "You should be with me. I made a mistake. This is all my fault."

Shhh. Shhh.

The scene is beyond surreal. In the glass of the french doors behind him you can see your reflection. Standing there, you look faraway from yourself, a different person, with another different person clinging desperately to your waist. You wonder who those people in the reflection are, and what the hell is going to happen to them. You wish you could fast-forward to the end and see.

"I can't believe I'm going to lose you. I can't bear the thought of you with someone else." This sets him sobbing again. You've never seen him like this, no matter how badly you had hoped to.

You want to tell him how many hours you spent over the last year crying like this for him, in vain. Finally you speak, "You were the one who said you weren't ready. You told me to see other people."

"I know." Sob sob. "I know. God, I don't know what's the matter with me. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me." He looks up at you and he is pleading, begging and almost pathetic. It rips a hole in your chest. "Please, please. Give me a chance. Please, give me a chance."

At any moment you may begin screaming and never be able to stop. In the smallest voice possible: "But, now there are other people involved." You watch those impossible tears distort his face until it seems unrecognizable. The other one's simple, warm smile seems a million miles away. You want to run to it, bask in it, escape from this heartbreaking complication.

You: "I don't think you really want to be with me. I think you just don't want me to be with anyone else."

Now he covers his face and whispers. "No, no, no, no, no." This isn't happening. Real life is not this dramatic. At least drama would be more clear cut; this mind boggling ambiguity is immobilizing.

You: "Either way I'm scared shitless. Either way I could be making a huge mistake. But I don't know what else to do. Honestly, I'm following my defensive instinct here, and I'm not even sure I know why." Now you are cry-

ing, but not without resistance. You hold that other smile in the palm of our hand, like a good luck charm against temptation, against self-destruction.

"Tell me what to do," he says, begs, "You belong with me. I'll do whatever I have to. I can't let you go. I know it's probably too late. But I can't let you go."

Shhh. Shhh.

For the first time in your life, you wish he was his old apathetic self.

Monkle

I have never met this man who continually touches my life and no, he is not Jesus Christ: he is my great-uncle Rupert on my father's side. As my father was growing up, he watched his own father devote a lifetime to the Gillette Company. After a long and faithful career, my grandfather received all the expected rewards: the retirement pin, the gold watch, the silver-plated shaving kit, the alcohol problem and the belief the he could have made it as an artist if he'd only dared. When my father was still quite young, my grandmother would sit in the next room soaking her feet and clinking the cubes in her tumbler. This was how she would unwind after a long night of slinging clam chowder to hungry tourists on the Boston Harbor. They didn't need the money, but "idle hands are the Devil's workshop," she would say. It is quite possible that the vast majority of famous Protestant adages were made trite exclusively through my grandmother's reiteration. She would greet any attempts at creativity by my grandfather or my father with words of encouragement such as, "What's the matter with you?"

Once or twice a year, Rupert would visit his brother, sister-in-law and nephew. The music of "Rhapsody in Blue" would waft about him, pheromone-like, wherever he went. My father would watch six-foot-six Uncle Rupert come bursting through the door at Christmas – ascot "all akimbo" – his eyes blazing with intellect, verve and just the right amount of gin. Rupert would boom, "The raucous clamor of 'O Holy Night' and the vulgar come-on that surrounds gift buying has left us (the royal "we") fairly nauseated. So little light from the Star of Bethlehem! But let me be the first to extend wunsche zum Jahreswechsel!" as he dipped my disapproving grandmother, sore feet and all, in an impulsive Tango. My grandfather would then retire with freshened scotch to the big chair feeling mocked by the very existence of Rupert.

Rupert was a Hollywood screenwriter. Rupert went to Yale at sixteen on a scholarship and hobnobbed with the top intellects of his time. Rupert could make A.L. Mencken sound like a diplomat in a battle of the quips and, to my father, was as irresistible as America itself. My father saw a man, who, through the sheer act of choosing, made a myth of himself from the same insipid raw materials that composed my grandmother and grandfather.

Many years later, my two siblings and I are called to dinner, a long lasting nightly event. This is the hour of the day when we each do our best to channel the ghost of Rupert. The cutlery need not be as sharp as the long as the tongue has been whetted, for the battle is always to the last wit at Dorothy Parker's dinner table. As the youngest, I learned to deliver a caustic barb without completely understanding its meaning and, mercifully, am judged only on form,

not content. Over time, the essence of Rupert is etched into the very fiber of my being through practice, practice, practice. And now, though hopefully tempered with empathy from my mother's genes, Rupert's sardonic sense lives happily alongside my own daily thoughts and emotions, brightening each day in a wry sort of way.

For Rupert, World War II brought an opportunity to photograph damage at Nagasaki for the U.S. Air Force. It seems that a life of contributing stories to the New Yorker and dating Hedy Lamarr was no longer sufficiently glamorous to captivate him, and what could be more glamorous than an intellectual in the trenches? But alas, even poor Rupert could not create art out of what he captured on film – out of what he saw with his own eyes.

After the war, Rupert returned to Hollywood, but, much to everyone's surprise, only to pack and then disappear. Five years later, Rupert sent letters to his loved ones and signed them, "Love, from Brother Matthew, Our Lady of Gethsemani, Trappist, Kentucky." It seems he traded in his Smith-Corona and martini shaker for a robe and sandals–a decision only slightly more deplorable to my grandmother than his choice to be a writer. "Now he makes cheese! How much cheese does he need? For years, he won't stop talking, and now all of a sudden he decides to stop talking for the rest of his life? What's wrong with him?" Now we call him Monkle. For my father, as well as for the rest of my immediate family, this unexpected move only solidifies Monkle's already mythic stature.

Even in the cloister Monkle finds occasion to name–drop. His cellmate is Brother Louis, A.K.A. Thomas Merton, whose compassion softens Monkle's cynicism. This is reflected in his writing, where the timbre now hints more at naivete than complexity. The same man that once lambasted the "shabby sincerity" of modern authors was now simply sharing the news of his life at the monastery in innocuous letters. He writes, "Our goose, Tabitha, will lay her seventh egg today in the nest she's made alongside a feedrack in the sheep barn; and on cold nights the lambs lie on the eggs to keep them from freezing, until such time as Tabitha decides to sit."

It becomes increasingly difficult for us, as a family, to distinguish between myth and reality; indeed, what more ardent believers of a myth exist than those who helped create it? Monkle lived with Ira Gershwin. Monkle sat on the Spanish Steppes with Hemingway until dawn. Monkle wrote material for Jack Benny. Monkle died on Christmas morning after thirty-three years at the Abbey. I am no longer interested in discerning fact from fiction; Monkle's effect on my life does not depend upon reality. What matters to me is that Monkle, the man with the world at his feet, turned away to kneel at the feet of something greater.

Longing in Purgatory

Lately, this longing has pestered me. I crave Mexico, like the sonambulos, like the espiritus de purgatorio crave rest. It is a different land, tongue, climate, and sphere of color, taste, and sound. It is a parallel dimension to our stoic, endlessly rushing, revolving door-freeway society. Mexico is air; the freedom to breathe and be. Open expanses of sky and horizon stretch out, meet, and merge caught in a love embrace with the earth. The earth there is pure and poetic, and holds within itself, like life, the sweet, fulfilling, and dense smell of dirt. You can no longer smell the dirt here. Instead you inhale oil, or gas, paint-thinner, or dozens of odorless vapors unhealthy for living beings but, "perfectly safe" to cohabitate with.

So, I miss the aromas of Tonala and its tianguis. The endless labyrinths of rows and rows of vendors, dealers, artisans, bakers, boilers, broilers, still etch their indelible mark upon my sleepless brow. I want to lose myself amongst the tarps of jewelers and sandal-makers, of Riverasque women and brown children. That unearthly realm apart from all relative time and space, where life flows at a flowering bud's pace, calls my name from far away and I want to run, want to sprout wings and zip to that hazy land, because there is not like here.

Here is the land of dragging feet, and no money for the bills that come and come, making me want to run off screaming in a mad frenzy, to the hills that stretch out behind my corner of this institution. This is where the days drag on never-ending with not enough hours to get everything done. This is the land where you sleep eight hours, like the men in the white coats say, and never ever rest. You sleep while accounts and debts, and aches, and pains, all swirl in your mind, congeal in your throat until the stale, starchy taste of them assails your tongue and awakens you. No matter how hard you try to wash the taste away, to drown it in other tastes, it stays.

I want to air myself out, to stretch out lazily in the days that lay before me, relishing the moment like lingering in bed on a cool, sunny morning when your bed sheets are warm, and your insides are fuzzy and giddy with comfort. That is my Mexico. It is a place where you lay, and you stand, and you are, all at once, and I can laugh, at everyone, and with everyone that either is bewildered or puzzled, enjoying, or just being with the strange pocha that talks tapatillo like any other person, haggles and harangues the merchants until they believe she is Jalisiense. There you are never tired despite the nights and the rains that swell up into torrents, creating rivers out of streets, welling you up in the nearest vecindad or pharmacy.

In Mexico life takes a siesta and eats pulpy mangoes, letting the juice run down and saturate hands, arms, the body entirely. It visits plazas in twi-

light and looks at the lovers sitting, talking, embracing, singing, and finds a lover of its own. Life chases children down the street, watches dogs lie in the sun, and pigeons peck at crumbs. There life lives.

On Sanctuary

Another day, same as the last, except with a different name. "If a rose by any other name ..."Oh, never mind. These meaningless tangents are all I have sometimes, well, especially when I can't hear the radio. Lately, it's that same old paranoia, "Nos robaron, pendeja, ve fijate en el closet." So, I grudgingly suffer through colorful epithets like shards of glass, through the gauntlet of a hallway, finally, past my mother.

I walk into my mother's closet; there on the door hangs the rack of shoes, except it's not a rack. It's really a huge brown plastic bag with 15 or 20 little pairs of kangaroo-like pouches and inside safe, brown, warmth, the shoes lie nestled like in a.... Sorry, couldn't surpress a smirk.

How could one person need so many shoes? The cobra skin tacones are her favorite ones, befitting, but I hate them. Then there are the blue suede ones. Right next to them there are red ones, green ones, ranging from deep forest to aqua, brown, black, gold, with bows, rhinestones, leather, cork-heeled, snakeskin, charol, suede, strappy ones, velvet, cloth. You name it, she's got it. It's these I go through first, carefully taking out each one. First I look in them, making sure to force my short, fat fingers to the very bottom of the toe, just in case a ring happened to stay behind. Then I look in the pouches themselves, which is harder, on account of I'm so short.

Again and again, I repeat the process while she paces the living room, answers an equally furious phone, and throws sporadic threats my way. I don't even flinch. The closet keeps me busy and when I close the door, like now, I barely hear her. I am in another world, one scented with mothballs and Paloma Picasso, of Downey and humedad. While I search through endless hangers of silks, rayons, polyesters, acrylics, gabardines, dresses, tweed, cotton, colorful skirts with parrots on them like arcoirises, furs and mohair, itchy and hot, I find, like small fetal surprises, rolled up socks, stuffed with bounty, pints of Southern Comfort, J&B, and even an occasional Jack Daniels. Sometimes, just sometimes, there will be just a gulp left, and I know that tonight the smack, smack, will be just a sound, not a sensation. My eyes tear up and my throat burns like when we boil the chiles colorados for mole. Meanwhile, outside the shouting subsides. I hear a car jettison from our driveway. I continue in this hot, scratchy, haven that smells of laundry, bourbon, and mothballs. I gather small bundle after small bundle, and tiny bottle after tiny bottle, pint after pint. I separate these into two. I question whether one is the affliction, the other the side effect, or if both are equal indicators of a greater malady. But in my small childish mind such matters are confusing and murky. I grasp at mist, there is

no permanent or clear answer. Soon the warmth is oppressive. My head lulls back and forth. My legs go numb with the weight of my body. My mind wanders towards the obscure. I do not exactly sleep, I do not exactly dream. There are only murky images flitting before me, crawling out of dingy cracks.

Suddenly, there is the roar of an engine. It means nothing to me, until the moment the closet door is thrown open by a puffy face and malt liquor smell. It is the familiar smack, smack and buzzing head that brings me back to the old tangent. No sanctuary is forever.

Red Vines

The bookstore's back room is lit by filtered fluorescent lights, the sort you can feel your vision deteriorating under, and though it's equipped with several steel shelving structures, they are full. Boxes line the exposed patches of wall and receiving bay, a small cleared space at the top of the L–shaped stockroom, where Bill keeps a small stereo next to inventory guns. My chocolate penny loafers gleam against the indeterminate gray muck of the floor – mostly label glue, garage oils and packing peanut dust, I'm sure, it's tinged only as fluorescent-lit retail schmutz can be. BillandJaymes are the shippingandreceiving men for this store; Jaymes unfailingly greets me with a "And how are you, the lovely Miss Amanda?" Bill, on sight of me always deadpans "Oh, look, it's Amanda, she's found time away from her job arranging dildoes at Hustler to be here."

Today, perched outside the entrance to the back room are the lower legs of an electrician, whose upper half is occupied with the schematics of the store's emergency alarm systems inside the short padded space above the paneled ceiling. I am early, so I lounge in the one padded chair at the break table, where there is a bulk tub of fresh (fresh!) red vines that I am determined to ignore, which is exactly what I'm doing when the door next opens, and it's not the pallid face of a fellow customer service associate, but the electrician, whom I now see is possessed of not only tan skin and fine black eyebrows over patent brown eyes, but also a healthy blue-collar build. Bill and I glance at each other from across the room; no other communication is necessary. It takes me a minute, the span of their encounter, to process that the electrician has said something to Bill about the orange industrial ladder hanging by one rung from his greasy cupped hand, and Bill only mumbles irrelevantly before taking it from him and coming to stand next to me as the door swings shut after a pair of navy workman's pants, what a sight, and so I don't realize that Bill has the red vines in a head lock, trying to pry the lid off when he replies (to an inquiry I apparently missed,) "I didn't realize that you'd be needing the ladder, Jaymes," all while prying at the awkward tub of candy, "or I would have brought it over there. And I want to have sex with the electrician." Through my laughter's tears, I see the red tub's in front of me and Bill has given up.

Evenly, he says to me "Would you open that, please?" I twist the lid off and Bill takes a red vine, before I pull two from the soft mass.

"Bill, have more, I don't want to be the fat girl."

"You're not the fat girl," he says before taking another.

Gasworks

There is a part of Queens, New York that stands out like a thumb set in plaster. Queens mostly has scattered wooden houses and old apartment buildings, the squat two and three story castle kind with thick balustrades and crests above the doors that mean nothing. These are the norm as far as structures that pack families against one another in Queens. But if you walk towards the river, in the direction of the loading docks, just south of the L's pretty steel trestles and Edwardian roofed platforms, the fake castles give way to about one-hundred buildings set in a sprawling square of about ten by ten, with an occasional errant spore springing outward from the mass. These are newer buildings, reddish concrete six-story structures shaped like typed "C"s, with the arms stretching out and folding back inward, each protecting its own private pool of concrete. Each building has steel windows that crank outwards toward the pool of concrete in the center of the structure, or outwards toward another structure, another that looks just the same. We live in one of these.

Our building is on the row closest to he the big gray factory. Mom moved here with stepfather after we were in Manhattan for a while – I don't know how long exactly, but President Nixon hadn't quit yet. It's better than the place we had before, where the bathtub was in the kitchen.

The kids call this place "The Courtyard." We are all in courtyards, and the kids in each play with the ones in the same courtyard, hardly ever with the kids in others.

You can see the factory out of mom and stepfather's bedroom window. We are six stories up, so if you stand back in the room, the factory seems to float in the frame of the window. I like looking at the factory because it changes shape just about every day. There are rows and rows of giant gray buzzer buttons, bigger than our building, each surrounded by a spider web frame. It's probably steel, really. One day the buttons are pretty much all the same height, the next day they are lower and higher than one another. I study them every day.

If you close one eye you can count the number of lines of the spider web from the top of any of the giant buttons, or all of them if you want. I write down the numbers in my book, and sometimes draw them. But no matter what I show to them, mom and stepfather say I'm silly, and that of course they do not move. Factories do not change shape, of course.

So I guess my eyes must be wrong-maybe there's something wrong with my brain. I mean, there must be something wrong with me, because sometimes I wake up in their bed naked in the middle of the day, all foggy and really tired, like I'm made of cotton, and I can't remember how I got there or where my clothes got to. I don't talk about it because it's pretty crazy just

waking up like that.

My stepfather knows this fellow across the courtyard, from Jordan, that's where my stepfather is from. This guy has a fat tired wife and about eleven kids, no kidding. One of the youngest kids is Fatama, a girl who's about seven, three years younger than me-she's just a kid. One day, there isn't anyone around that wants to make forts out of cushions, so I ask Fatama. While we are up there, the living room demolished, I hear screams from the courtyard, screams calling for Fatama. Fatama's eyes! I never saw eyes like that before, wide and full of some kind of ugly scary thing that she's seen happen before, and boom! She instantly runs to the window and cries for her mother. You would think she was getting beat up or something. I get that something is terribly wrong, so I pull at her and tell her to stop it-just leave if you want to! I can see that her mother is no longer in the courtyard.

I try to talk to Fatama and ask her what's the matter, but by now I'm running around with my hands in my hair. Then I can hear thumping on the metal-framed stairs, and then the front door, which is unlocked, gets tossed back so fast and hard I think it will bust from the hinges. There stands Fatama's mother. She's PANTING! I try saying nothing is wrong, but she grabs Fatama by the arm, beats her behind, and drags her out into the hall, howling. I run to the door to try and close it and lock them out, but Fatama's mother forces it back-she wants me! I wonder if my eyes look like Fatima's now. She must have pushed really hard, because I fall backward and land on my back, the door wide open. Before I can gather my senses, she starts pulling me up by the hair and slapping my face. I twist free and run screaming to the bathroom, but she's right behind me, and just as I get the door almost shut, she bounds against it and the door pops open like a giant jack-in-the-box, and I fall back against the bathtub. I hit my head, then roll up in a ball, while she kicks me and punches me. Then she grabs my hair, my arms, my shirt, all, whatever she can get and drags me out of the bathroom, still screaming, down the hall, out the front door, and twisting my arm like a straw, she slams the front door, locking me out. I'm crying hard now and begging her to tell me what I did. She finally says something in English about my papa finding me out now, and that he will see the place like it is. Then she leaves, dragging Fatama downstairs with her.

After a while I realize I have a lump on my head, my lip is cut, my shirt ripped, I have bloody scratches on my face from her rings, I don't have money for a phone or a soda, and it is about 10:00 AM, summertime, and mom will not be home for another eight hours. I don't know where stepfather is, which is weird because he's usually watching TV in bed naked around now, or in the living room in his boxers. But no, the living room is full of cushions and pillows shaped like imaginary forts.

They aren't strong enough. Pillows don't work as forts, not really ever. I guess I know that, what am I thinking of? If he's in there, in the bedroom, he would have come out, right? No, he isn't in there.

I begin to wonder if there is some sort of Jordanian rule against making a mess? Would stepfather use his belt? It couldn't be much worse than this, but still. He always doubled the number of hits if I chose his hand. How can I get in there and clean up the place so they won't know anything happened?

I wonder if I can drop down into a window from the roof, then I remember were mom went once with me when she lost her keys. There is an office that has the keys to all of these places about, oh, a million blocks from here. Now I am so mad I don't even feel anything, like I'm made from cotton. Good. So I get up and start walking. I don't look at anybody so they won't see me and I get to the place at about noon.

The guy behind the counter looks at me like I'm crazy and asks if I'm okay. I kind of ignore him and then tell him where I live and that I locked myself out, and I ask if I can have the key-and some water too? He stares at me for a minute, then mumbles that I'm bloody, and turns away. He brings me some water and a wet paper towel, and asks what happened. I look at him for a while. I want to cry so badly. He has those nice eyes, and I want to tell somebody, but I—

"I got jumped by some kids from another court," I said, wiping my face and arms.

"Geeze kid. Where's your mom and dad?"

"I don't know right now. Can I have the key, sir, please?"

"Well, okay, but you'll have to tell your dad your account's going to be charged 50 cents for the key."

"Really? Can I just bring it back, maybe tomorrow?"

"Well, maybe. Say, how did you get here today?"

" I walked."

"Walked! All this way like that? Boy you'll get in trouble, won't you?

"Yea, if you charge him, yea."

"I tell you what, this one's on me kid, okay?"

"Really?"

"Sure. Say, have you eaten any lunch? Probably not, huh? There's a burger stand across the street, how's about I treat you?"

"No, no thanks, I'm not very hungry." I'm actually really hungry, but for some reason I'd rather die than let this man with the nice eyes know that. But I have an idea about something that I want to get straight. "Mister, you know my building from the key, right?"

"Well sort of kid. I mean there's a lot of them and I don't go down there often."

"Okay, but you know the factory across the street from my building?"

"Oh yeah, sure, the Gasworks."

"Gasworks? Well, it changes shape doesn't it?"

"Changes shape?"

"You know, the giant buzzer buttons with the steel spider webs around them, the buzzer buttons get bigger and smaller, huh?"

"Buzzer-buttons? What, oh, wait, I think I know what you mean. Those 'buzzers' are great big tanks that hold natural gas."

He gets a blank response from me.

"Okay. Let's see . . . that's the stuff that makes the fire on your stove. It's a gas, sort of like helium, the stuff they put in the balloons in the park that makes the bubble up and float."

"Oh?"

"Well those tanks are like a shell, like a big steel bubble, and when they are full of natural gas, they are pushed up all the way to the top of the girder rigging . . . that's what looks like a spider web."

"Girder . . . rigging."

"And when there's less natural gas, they retract into big slots in the ground. That getting bigger and smaller keeps the pressure of the gas inside even, no matter how much is in the tank."

"So they do change shape – get bigger and smaller?"

"That's how it looks from the outside kid. Sure you're not hungry?"

"No, but thanks a lot mister. I mean a real lot, thanks!"

"Fine kids, say, have your mom tend to those cuts okay?"

"Sure. Bye."

All the way home I wonder about those tanks. So my eyes aren't crazy. I begin to think about the other crazy stuff, like waking up naked and getting beat for playing fort, but the more I try, the more I can't, the more I try, the more I feel like I'm made of cotton and the dizzier I get. I just can't, right now I have to put the cushions back and try and decide if I want to tell stepfather "belt" or "hand," that's all, just "belt" or "hand."

Backroads

As usual, the ride in my mother's 1971 yellow Volkswagen Beetle was one that left many, including myself, wondering if any sort of travel was possible. As we set out for Hanford, California, it was a thought that ran not just through my mind, but my mother's and twin sister's as well.

My mom's VW has a history. Like most cars, it has had its share of owners, who, in one way or another, has gotten what they wanted from Susie and moved on. She, however, was by no means a lemon when my mom made the purchase and decided to take her home. My six year-old eyes, although pure, had discovered a way of seeing half-truths. So, when I first laid eyes on Susie, I instinctively knew that she had not been taken care of properly. Her tires were excruciatingly old and when driven, I had the feeling that somehow it pained Susie to move even a couple of steps forward. Years of abuse had reduced her to a pale, washed-out tone that was like squash. But, in spite of her flaws and imperfections, that yellow VW managed to recover almost immediately after we took her home. Her recovery lasted a short time as Susie continued to have relapses of past life. On many occasions, my mom's VW would break down on the way to places like the grocery store or the laundry mat, but Susie bounced back to eventually deliver us to faraway places like Fresno and Hanford.

The town of Hanford is small but enjoyable, even for a city girl. While my mother shared countless stories of her and her sister's past childhood growing up in Hanford, it didn't become appealing until she mentioned their Sunday afternoon excursions to the popular and heavily trafficked ice cream shop. Thoughts of thick, creamy, homemade ice cream demanded my attention when my mother, sister and I traveled the back roads of rural life en route to Hanford, the town where my mother was born.

The day was unusually hot for the month of June. In fact, the onslaught of humid weather didn't usually arrive until late July. My mother who often hummed while she drove seemed unaffected by the odor of cows, onions and manure that seeped through our open window. My sister, however, occupied the five-hour drive by snoring loudly. I sat stoic and alert, ready to catch a glimpse of something unforeseen. As I continued to read each mileage sign that brought me closer to homemade ice cream, I became less aware of where we were headed. Secretly, I thought my mother was too. She, of course, would disagree.

Just as I turned my head to the right to the next approaching mileage sign the car struck something in its path. It happened so fast that neither my mother nor I became aware of what actually transpired. My sister, however, awoke from her slumber and yelled out "Oooooooh, Mama you just ran over some-

thing! Maybe even an animal!" As my mom looked back, she realized that she had run over a chicken. She surmised that it must be dead and proceeded to drive on, but I somehow knew that it was still alive and had a chance to live – I could not fathom the little chicken in the middle of the road, so I convinced my mom to turn the car around.

Once there, I got out of the car and went toward the chicken. He was scared and shaking uncontrollably. His right leg was twisted underneath him and appeared painfully distorted as blood spilled from his useless legs. I picked him up and carried him back to our car. Once in the car, I laid him down to make him more comfortable. The blood continued to flow, but I didn't care as I told my mom we had to find its owner. We were sure that the chicken couldn't have traveled far from home.

We eventually found the owner's home, but he wasn't there. Other chickens had gotten loose. I convinced my mom and even my sister to help me round up the chickens back into the yard. It took us awhile, but we made sure that they were gated away from drivers who, like us, were probably on their way to enjoying simple pleasures like eating ice cream.

As for my little friend the chicken, I took special care of him as I placed him on the owner's front door with a note attached: "Sorry, but my mom ran over your chicken. He got loose. But don't worry because I kept him warm and took care of him. I hope he'll be okay."

Interview

On March 7, 2001, Mount St. Mary's hosted Cristina Garcia as a part of the ongoing Writer's Series. Before giving a public reading as well as a question & answer session, Garcia spoke with Mount Voices' Editor, Amanda Prince.

Amanda Prince: I know you grew up in New York – why did you come to Los Angeles?

Cristina Garcia: I came to Los Angeles in 1988 for work. Previously, I had been the *Time* Magazine's bureau chief for Florida and the Carribbean. I didn't like L.A. very much initially, although I like it very much now. As a literary writer in Los Angeles you're very much on the fringes, it's not like the entertainment industry – you're very priveleged as a fiction writer. I'm almost superstitious now, I don't feel like I can write anywhere but L.A.

P: Tell me about the colors in Dreaming in Cuban. White and green and red come up often, but blue is the most prominent – there's a line in the book, something like "You could almost die waiting for the right shade of blue." Do they have any significance or was it for sensual effect?

G: I think it's mostly textural. I know I was most struck by blue when I was in Cuba in 1984. I was staying with my aunt by the ocean and I had a grandmother in old Havana. The ocean and sea were everywhere and the horizon was always blue

P: Women are the prominent characters in Dreaming in Cuban, and its female in a very visceral way – you can almost feel menses in the words. Was that intentional or did the book simply evolve that way?

G: It was organic to the book – I was obsessed by these women's lives as I was creating them, and I was interested in how political events trickle down into the lives of women and their relationships with eachother. Men are on the sidelines almost by default, there was no intent.

P: The women seem to be on either side of the revolution in Dreaming in Cuban as well as The Aguero Sisters was this an intentional development or organic?

G: There was no political intent. The characters evolved as individuals, not archetypally – I feel they're more layered, shaded and subtle than

simply being on one side or the other. I had no axes to grind and I wanted to do each character justice. Their compulsions, obsessions, derrangements, whatever – this all included their views on the revolution and it all came out of their growth as organic individuals.

P: Dreaming in Cuban spans nearly half a century – was if difficult to keep the chronology together and cohesive?

G: I went through many drafts, and it started out as a straight narrative, but I realized I needed to do it more in sections, and the narrative needed to be through juxtaposition. It evolved from the needs of the characters. I would start out with one idea, and over time, something else would happen. Pilar, who is a bit of an alter-ego – I wrote her the way I wished I could've been, went from being in the first person to being in the third – it was one of many occasions where the characters led theway. At a certain point, a novel coalesces and you just go for the ride.

P: How did Celia's letters come about?

G: The letters came in later. Celia didn't have an opportunity in the third person to speak, and I wanted her to have an outlet – she was constrained by her circumstances. Her first letter, to Gustavo when Jorge comes courting, Iwrote that and though why not do more? It allowed me to play more with imagistic and poetic and illogical and impressionistic language than the narrative did.

P: What happened at Felecia's death? Was it the Santeria spirits or illness or...?

G: I'm not really sure what happened to her. She might have been infected by her first husband [who had syphilis], or maybe it was just a confluence of the disappointments in her life. Her death just seemed right then. It was Felecia that led me to Santeria, which I knew very little about. I had a superstitious aunt and some exposure in Florida from a journalistic viewpoint; what's written in Dreaming in Cuban is based on research, but the Santeria in The Aguero Sisters comes from direct observation, though I'll stand by both. Santeria is not very exotic to its practitioners, it's integrated into their daily lives.

P: Why do you write?

G: At this point, it's a necessity. It snuck up on me. I do it now for the pleasure, though not everyday is fun. But I've found nothing outside of

childrearing as deeply satisfying and pleasurable as creating a whole new world. It's one of very few things one can do where you have that total control, there's no collaborative effort and you don't need any money. Even if they're not published, you could still write books. That meta-existence you create is often more interesting than real life. Dreaming in Cuban was my first real fiction, besides a couple of short stories and one poem.

P: What about the structure of a novel? Does one start out with a mapped out plan or does it evolve on its own?

G: You write hundreds of drafts in sections, in sort of a feverish way. Often very little remains of a first draft, the end novel resembles very little the first draft. It's a process of continual revision and re-editing. Musically it changes, sentence by sentence – you drop and rearrange by music alone.

P: What would you say to new authors?

G: Truly, when you end up writing as an extension of avid reading...read as widely and in as many different directions as possible and then see. Some like the idea of the writing life, but it's very solitary and contemplative. Every day, before I begin writing, I read poetry for a few hours...poetry is bathing in texture.

Profiles

Anne Buster will graduate from the California State University of Northridge this spring with a B.A. in English; her plans include a stint as a park ranger. She enjoys gardening and international travel. Anne is also a Dodgers enthusiast who owns a Saturn and has two cats. She lives in Los Angeles, where she writes poetry and hopes to become ridiculously rich.

Dan Boehl is from Virginia. He has studied poetry at the Taos Writing Conference, which is sponsored by the University of New Mexico.

Christine C. Byks is a fourth year student at Albion College in Albion, Michigan majoring in English, with a creative writing emphasis and Geology, with a concentration in environmental sciences. Her previous publications included articles in the student newspaper, *The Pleiad*, and poetry in a student publication S.I.N.G. She is currently finishing a creative writing thesis in poetry and creative non-fiction.

Kathy Crabb is a daughter, sister, friend, writer and wife who resides in the Los Angeles area and tries to live humbly in the struggle for creativity and peace.

Anna Harrington resides in the Chicago, Illinois, area and is currently employed as an advertising executive, though she has written for many years. She has been published in *The Red Cedar Review*, *Aura Literary Arts Journal*, *Fugue*, *Flying Island* and *The Book Press*. "White Cross" is based on her experiences in Peru.

Jay Howe lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He writes poetry and is pursuing a career in teaching.

Kelly Kester-Smith is a Mount graduate who resides in Los Angeles, California. She writes poetry and has recently begun studying Ayurvedic medicine.

Roseann Lloyd is a Creative Writing Professor at Augsberg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She has been published in numerous other journals, including *Luna*. *War Baby Express*, from Holy Cow! Press, is her most recentbook, and next year that same house will publish *Because of the Light*, which will include her poems from Guatemala.

Joyce Liu graduates from Mount St. Mary's College this spring with a BA in English and Art. She admits to over-analyzing "Dawson's Creek" episodes and aspires to change the world.

Rachel Manheimer is from West Hollywood and is currently pursuing a theatrical design major. She spends her free time working on local area stage productions and writing when the muse moves her.

Annie Matthews , barring any nightmarish, last-minute discovery of some huge oversight, will graduate in May with a bachelors in English. She fancies herself a writer when she's feeling unstable, and in her more solid moments hopes to be a teacher. Noble enough to love Shakespeare and shallow enough to want a two-piece-bathing-suit-body, Annie only has a few bad habits (none of them too illegal.) She thinks her brothers are the most brilliant, gentle and handsome men in the world, and if anyone wanted to hire Annie, she'd probably write for practically free.

Heather D. McGunigle is a senior majoring in Liberal Arts and minoring in both Psychology and English. She is the mother of a four-year-old daughter, and she plans to attend law school and study public interest law.

Joey Nicoletti lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico, where he writes, paints, and drinks Peach Snapple. He is currently pursuing an MA in Creative Writing/Poetry at New Mexico State University. He has previously been published in The Fanquier Poetry Journal and The Bitter Oleander.

Maria Ochoa is a second-year student at Mount St. Mary's College. She is studying English and Business and hopes to open an entertainment company geared at facilitating entry of minorities into the Hollywood industry. She also dreams of buying a home on Mulholland Drive, re-roofing it with Spanish tile and painting it indigo. She is also a proud member of Latinas Unidas.

Grier Phillips is a senior at Roanoke college where she is double majoring in Philosophy and English and minoring in German. She holds both an academic and a faculty scholorship, and is a member of Xi Theta Chi, a foreign language fraternity.

Amanda Prince, the current editor of *Mount Voices*, is a junior at Mount St. Mary's College, where she is double majoring in English and

History. Her passions have long included literature and politics, though she has recently come to love bowling and rap music – when necessary, she argues that rap is often expressive of socio-political issues, although she has little defense of bowling beyond that it's fun to hurl heavy objects at other objects. Her personal best at bowling is a 171, though she usually averages about 100. In the fall, she will be traveling to Ireland for a semester abroad.

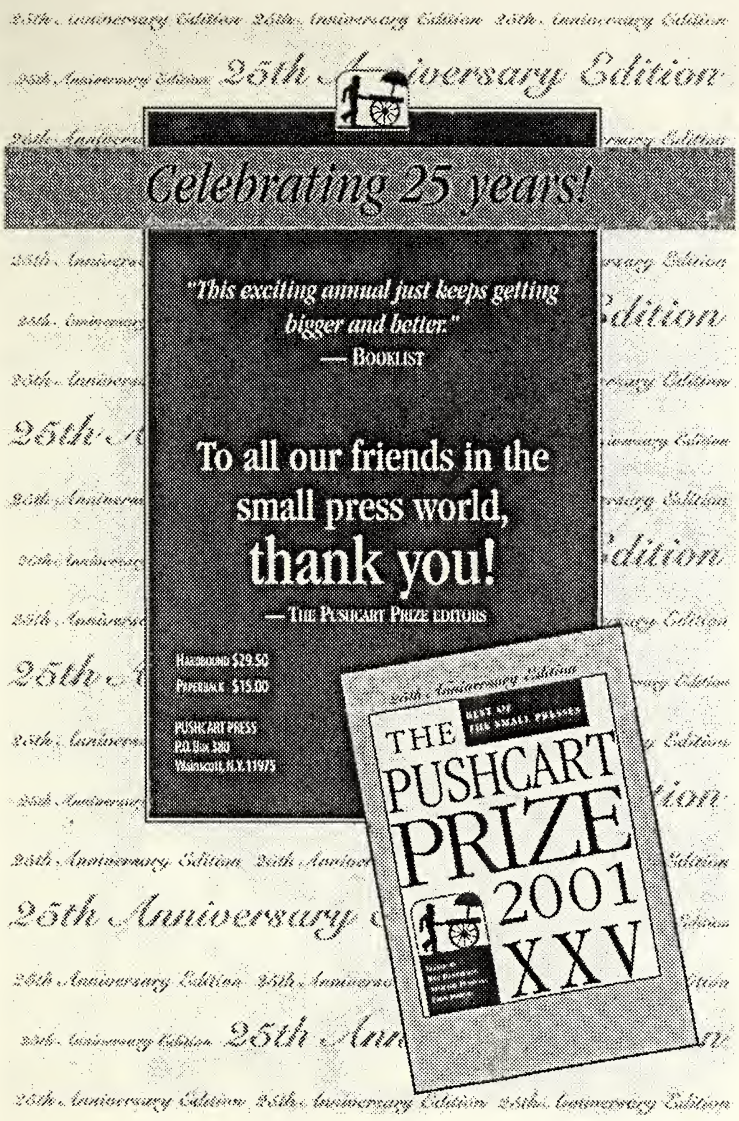
Rocio Ramirez is a junior double majoring in Business and Philosophy at the Mount. Her hobbies include painting, reading, and running.

Lorena Santos is junior at the Mount, and she is majoring in English. Her interests include reading, writing, and music.

Alan Stauffer is a junior majoring in English in the Mount's Weekend. His hobbies include writing, hiking, singing, and reading.

Dania Sutton is a junior at Mount St. Mary's College, where she is majoring in English. Her hobbies include browsing antiques and attending flea markets, and she also enjoys traveling. Dania is passionate about news in any form and she plans to become a journalist and novelist.

Steffi Weisburd, who has studied in the Taos Writers' Conference (part of the University of New Mexico Creative Writing Program,) lives and writes poetry in New Mexico.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